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Hobbies verses the World

Are We Becoming a One-Dimensional Society?

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Are hobbies a dying breed? What does this imply about society? I interviewed the staff at the Homewood Suites Hotel (the place I work) to hear about what they do with their free time. Without a productive time outside of work, people are falling prey to a one-dimensional society: full of technology but empty of creative individuals who have a clear identity. There were 4 major reasons that those I interviewed would do a certain activity in their free time: enjoyment, social time, personal time, and tradition. As I expected, many did not have a clear so-called "hobby", but just routine daily activities. There are many sociological explanations for this apparent decline in hobbies. Marxism, conspicuous consumption, tragedy of culture, critical theory, and phantasmagoria are all pertinent to this study.

Introduction


"We live in an age when the flick of a dial on a television set brings us immediate diversion- enough to fill all our evenings and weekends year in and year out.... While we have grown accustomed to these conveniences and rely upon some of them as necessities of everyday life, many of us have begun looking back to a less commercial, more individual creative time."

This is the introduction to the Readers Digest Association's Crafts and Hobbies manual.

Is it true that so-called "hobbies" are a dying breed? If so, what does this imply about society as a whole or the individuals that make it up? There are a number of possible connections between the ways people choose to spend their free time and the overarching culture of our day.

Research Question

This study originated from some important questions I that I have been asking myself: "Who do I want to be?", "Are the activities I'm involved in reflective of the person?", and "Am I spending my time wisely?" My concern is that people are losing a sense of identity in today's culture. People DO a lot of things, but a number of these things do not allow for personal creativity. There's a certain job to get done at the office, certain things to do with the family, and all the days of the week begin to blend together. It appears that people do not have a consistent



individual time to produce something unique of their own accord. Without doing something different than everyone else, one becomes like a mass person, going through the motions in the pull of the culture

What is a Hobby?

In this study the operational definition of a hobby consists of three essential components:

1. An activity someone chooses to do with his or her free time.
2. An activity that involves some sort of work, producing a finished product over a period of time.
3. An activity that “fits” the individual’s interests/ personality.

These three ingredients of a hobby purposely include and exclude certain activities.

Watching television and movies or playing video games may relieve stress and allow someone to relax, but is not involving some sort of work, enabling the individual to “twist” it to his or her own personal preference. Anyone can sit and watch television, but what we are looking for is an escape from conformity. Playing some type of sport or exercise would qualify as a hobby. This is an activity that produces a “final product” of keeping your body in shape. Of course the sport would vary according to the individual.

A hobby in this study is something a person is passionate about. It doesn’t just have to be collecting or building, it is more than that. A hobby is an escape from the necessities of the world and an entrance into what really makes us tick. It would be nice if people not only discerned what character traits they wanted to have, but actually were able to develop those traits through an activity. The idea is equivalent to not just knowing your purpose, but actually carrying it out. People should be able to say “This is who I am, this is how I spend my time, this is what I love doing.”

In the past, the activities that one was involved in defined the kind of person they were:

“To know where one belonged, in the Middle Ages, was to know who one was; identity was not personal but communal, a matter of affiliation, status, and role: one was a Baker or a Smith...that was all the I.D. that was needed either for external recognition or internal self-assurance. Not to know where one belonged was to be truly alien, unprotected and unacknowledged, a homeless mind without a sense of self” (Montagu and Matson, 1983).

Viktor Frankl suggested a similar idea when he said, “There is nothing in the world, I dare say, which would so effectively help man to survive and keep healthy as would the knowledge of a life task.” In the book, The Plight of Modern Man, the author writes, “It is, then, by productive activity that man is what he is and becomes what he becomes” (Bier, 1972).

Ways People Spend their Time

For when I was a babe and wept and slept,
Time crept;
When I was a boy and laughed and talked,
Time walked;
Then when the years saw me a man,
Time ran,
But as I older grew, time flew (Robinson and Godbey, 1997)

What greater influence is there on humankind than the fact that our lives are constantly ticking away until we eventually die? The fact that our time here on earth is limited should cause us to carefully choose the way we spend our time. How do we spend the time that we have?

In the book Hidden Rhythms, the author suggests that humans have gotten into the habit of scheduling activities for “particular times of the day and particular times of the week” (Zerubavel, 1981). He uses the example of eating, not necessarily when we are hungry, but usually during the “designated eating periods” (i.e., breakfast, lunch and dinner). The same can be said of sleep, in the way that most people usually go to bed at a certain time, not when they begin to feel tired. This regularity that we give to our daily life affects the way we spend our


time. If the average person spends 8 hours sleeping, and takes a half an hour each for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, our 24 hour day is now down to 14.5 hours.

In the book The Economics of Time, the author divides time up into two categories: work time and non-work time. He makes an important distinction between leisure time and work time when he writes, “the chief characteristics of pure leisure activities is that they must be undertaken ‘for their own sake’ because they produce only direct utility” (Sharp, 1981). This subject of pure leisure is what this study is particularly interested in. If we take Sharp’s distinction between work and non-work time, and the average person works 8 hours a day, then our non-work time is down to 6.5 hours. Of course this does not take into account the washing of dishes, mowing the lawn, or bringing work home from the office to do during the evening. What we are left with is 3-5 hours of “pure leisure” time. A major idea behind this study is that the way we use this leisure time says a lot about the kind of person we are.

According to the 1998 General Social Survey, 73% of those that answered said they would like to spend a little or much more time in leisure activities. From 1972-1994, 87% of those that answered said they get at least a fair amount of satisfaction in their “non-working” activities. The U.S. News and World Report suggests that people are “still craving passionate pursuits....” The authors write, “people are defining themselves now more by how they play than by how they work. Seasoned careers disappear, companies disappear, employers go up in smoke, and so people are finding community in these other activities” (Silver and Morris, 2002).

Entertainment

Entertainment becomes an interesting variable in this study because of the influence it has over society. In 2003 the Christian Media Literacy Institute reported that the average American child spends more than 21 hours per week viewing television (not including video



games, Internet, movies). The American Academy of Pediatrics states that by the time the average person reaches age 70 they will have spent approximately 7-10 years watching television. According to the General Social Survey in 1998, 73% of those that answered said that on the average they watch at least 2 hours of television a day. That leaves the average person with less than an hour of leisure time a day. Television alone has become a major part of American society. Instead of sitting in front of a screen for 7 years of our lives we must decide on more meaningful ways to spend our time.

Work time

Some people have a job that fits them perfectly. These people would be the first to say that they are completely happy with their career and that's where they want to spend their energy. I would assume, however, that these kinds of people are in the minority. There is a sense of conformity in a society that has become workaholics. If your work is your only passion then you are stuck under the umbrella of mass man. Although a great deal of creativity and individuality can be expressed while on the job, their time outside of the job would suffer from lack of consideration. The time spent on the job is different than leisure time because it is influenced by rules, culture, and other individuals.

The magazine Fast Company published an article that describes Paul Schaye, a man who had two passions—one professional, the other personal. Schaye describes these two important aspects of his life as “informing and transforming each other.” The personal must be separated from the professional. Dr. Eleanor Mariano, the lead physician to past U.S. presidents suggested that business executives are spending too much time in the workplace. She says, “This scene is far too common and endangers lives” (Gudmastad, 2003).

The principle that the person loves in his or her job can be applied in creative ways to leisure time. Their needs to be just as much productive time in the private realm as there is in the public realm. The free time a person has cannot afford to be wasted. There must be other avenues of the expression of one's character outside of the public (work) realm. Take a person who loves social work. They enjoy helping others and get a real sense of satisfaction out of it. A way he or she could apply this to the private realm could be volunteering in the evenings or on the weekends. This is a free choice on the part of the individual- something outside of work that he or she is choosing to do on his or her own. When people begin to make choices outside of work, apart from the influence of society, then it is in these choices that a person defines him or her self.

Alienation

Many people have a certain understanding of the word alienation, but it can be used in many different ways. In the book The Plight of Modern Man, the author points out that "it is difficult to understand what the 'alienation of man' can mean, if we do not at the same time know what man has become estranged from" (Bier, 1972). According to Feuerbach (1841), alienation represents "man's refusal to become all he is capable of being, his unwillingness to find the perfection of human being in being human." Humans have "relinquished the responsibility" of becoming the people that God created them to be. Alienation in this instance is a degradation of man from what he truly is or should be. It is important to understand how alienation ties into this study. Is it true that people have strayed from developing the self, sacrificing their personal free time for their jobs and entertainment? We have become alienated from being productive in our free time, the time that is most reflexive of our identity.

Marx had the idea that people should have an “interconnection” between themselves and their work. That is where the highest form of human potential lies. Under capitalism, there was a breakdown of these natural interconnections. “Under capitalism, instead of choosing their productive activities, people have their activities chosen for them by the owners, the capitalists” (Ritzer, 2003). Not only that, after the worker has completed a project it is given to the company he or she works for. “Once they’ve made the products the workers are completely separated from them” (Ritzer, 2003). Finally, the workers are usually separated from each other, each given their own task and asked to work alone.

There are a number of parallels from what Marx was saying about Capitalism to this study. The type of alienation he is talking about is alienation from the *best productive situation*. This same principle of alienation from the best productive situation can be applied to the private realm. For some reason people are not seeking an “interconnectedness” with an activity in their free time. If Marx is on to something about human potential relating to our being connected with a productive activity, then it seems where work would fit that in a public sector, hobbies fits it perfectly in the private. Marx ended his argument with saying that people driven further and further away from their potential because they are reduced to machines. That is how our society is becoming, like a mass person who goes to work and then comes home and neglects his potential of creativity. People are satisfied to go to work and let down at home. If we never assert our personalities in a hobby or some sort of activity then we lose sight of our potential and are lost in society.

Methodology

I interviewed the staff at Homewood Suites Hotel, the place I work part-time. I interviewed fifteen people on paper, but the total number of people interviewed came to over

twenty. There were three major reasons for interviewing these particular people. The first is that I knew these people well, and I expected them to be willing to share about their personal time. The second is that everyone I interviewed had a full-time, 8 hours-a-day job there. Third, except for the manager, the housekeepers, front desk, and maintenance people leave the job when eight hours is up and do not bring anything home with them. This allowed for a pure look into how people who have a normal 8-hour job spend their free time.

The questions I asked went something like this:

1. In general, tell me about what you like to do in your free time.
2. Do you spend a lot of time watching television or surfing the Internet?
3. Do you feel like you are productive outside of work? If not, does that bother you?
4. Why do you like to do the things you do in your free time? How do you identify with those activities?
5. How does the feeling you have at work compare or contrast to the feeling you have during free time?

Findings

Of the people I interviewed there were 4 common themes running through their answers. These themes explained why they chose to do a specific activity with their free time:

1. Enjoyment

The assistant manager, Todd, said, "If you're not enjoying something then don't do it." William, a housekeeper, commented, "I love baseball and it keeps me out of trouble." He collects baseball cards and watches baseball on television. A number of others commented on "enjoying" the things they do. Enjoyment is the biggest reason people chose to be involved in some sort of activity. People feel a sense of interconnectedness with the hobby and get a form of satisfaction out of it. (Per. Int., Mar. 15)

2. Social

Sandy, who works in the pantry, said, “It’d be easy to be a loner and I don’t want to be content with that.” Una, a housekeeper, commented, “I don’t like to sit around. I like to keep moving; I like to see people.” The desire to be productive often inspires people to “go out” and get involved in something. The fear of “wasting” time or being idle all the time causes people to seek out activities that will allow them to interact with others. (Per. Int., Mar.15)

3. Personal Time

On the other hand of social reasons, some people enjoy having a specific time set aside for themselves. Sara, who works in the pantry, said “I enjoy to walk because it’s the only time I get to be by myself.” Many people said that the activities that they are involved in help to relieve stress and “unwind.” This is not to say that it has to be unproductive. While on walks Sara brings the dog, digs for snapping turtles, plants flowers, and simply enjoys being out in nature. Liz, a housekeeper, said, “Time by myself allows me to think of creative things, things I could turn into art.” Not all quiet time has to be spent doing nothing. There is revival in doing the things you love. (Per. Int., Mar. 15)

4. Tradition

This category caught me by surprise. Brett, the manager, said, “My family did a lot of camping, fishing, and boating when I was younger-when I do those things it takes me back to those times.” Phil, the custodian, said, “I’ve been doing mechanic work since I was a kid.” It seems that the influences of our childhood often determine some of the things we’re interested later in life. (Per. Int., Mar. 15)

There were some other interesting comments that were made. Brett, the manager, was the only one to show concern for not having enough time to spend on the things that he would really like to do. He said, "Sometimes I think 'how am I going to fit this in my schedule?'" Out of everyone that I interviewed he has by far the most responsibility, energy, and time commitment to put into the job. The assistant manager, Todd, talked about having to have a balance between work and a hobby. He said, "When it's time for the job, I am into it, and when it's time for the studio [his hobby of music composing], it's on!" He is able to love his job but also sees the importance of having that personal productive time. He says, "Dollars are nothing, if you're not enjoying it then don't do it." He works in his music studio three times a week. (Per. Int., Mar.15)

General Findings

I was surprised that many of the people I talked to had an idea of a specific hobby or activity that they were involved with. I was expecting people to have a very specific hobby or else not really do anything at all and watch a lot of television. What I found was something in the middle. People did list specific activities, although not all of these activities were necessarily a great form of the hobbies I referred to earlier. Many of the activities had to do with things people would do anyway, like shopping, reading, going on a walk, or listening to music. These things could constitute a hobby, but I was looking for activities that were really reflective of a person's personality, like Todd the music composer, or Phil the mechanic, or William the baseball fanatic. It sounds much better saying those titles than Sara who likes going on walks, or Bonnie who likes shopping. Going shopping or going on walks doesn't really give someone a sense of creative identity, whereas someone who produces music or fixes other people's cars is a very practical skill.

Although a lot of people did say that they watch television once and a while, I was surprised that there wasn't more mention of entertainment in their lives. A few people played video games a lot and others liked to watch some specific television programs. I do think that people did not mention it as much because they didn't want to come across as lazy.


Weaknesses

Before I talk about the weaknesses, the strength of this study was that it was very practical. It wasn't as much a research project as it was an idea for people to think about. It was a chance for me to talk to people and see what has worked for them in their lives. The major weakness of this study was that I was trying to measure very widespread and changing cultural trend with a few interviews. Although hobbies probably are a good measure of people being productive in their free time, it is far from the only measure. It is impossible to explain the culture becoming like a mass man by just looking at the hobbies people have.

Instead of actually saying more about society, this study says much more about individuals. Each person has to weigh his or her own free time and the things that are most important to them. The principle of being productive and having a clear identity does apply to everyone. My sample size of 15-20 was rather small, but I knew those people well and I think they were comfortable talking with me. I don't know if having a larger sample size would have told me much more, I only would have had more examples to refer to. There may have been some impression management going on when they were answering my questions- trying to create a better image of the ways that they spend their free-time.

Social Theory Explanations

1. Marxism




George Ritzer (2003) comments that “under capitalism, people came to care little about expressing their creative capacities in the act of appropriating nature. Rather, they focus on owning things and earning enough money to acquire those things.” This may be a possible modern day explanation of why people have lost interest in hobbies. The earning potential of jobs is more important than having a quality free time. The way people spend their time can be applied to commodification. The things people own are more important than developing their personal interests.

2. Conspicuous Consumption

Along the same lines, Thorstein Veblen suggested that the possession of goods could lead to higher sense of status for people. In other words the factor that distinguishes people from one another are goods and not personalities. (Ritzer, 2003) If this is true then someone would be more focused on their earning potential and how many possessions they have instead of focusing on their own character. If there is no emphasis on developing the character and your talents then there wouldn't be a place for hobbies.

3. Tragedy of Culture

“Marx was convinced the human individual had lost himself, becoming enslaved to an economic force which men had created but could no longer control” (Bier, 1972). George Simmel had a similar idea about not being able to keep up with the products that the culture creates. (Ritzer, 2003) Ritzer says, “The tragedy of culture is that our meager individual capacities cannot keep pace with our cultural products.” What cultural products have influenced the possible decline of hobbies? A simple answer is technology and entertainment. The Internet and e-mail weren't around a few years ago, now many people depend on it as a source of



communication and daily business functions. D.V.D.'s and video games have had the same success. People have the option to spend their time on these technological creations instead of spending time on hobbies.


4. Critical Theory

Critical theorists discussed an idea called the culture industry and how it dominated society and individuals. (Ritzer, 2003) Mass culture consists of newspapers, news stations, magazines, and the Internet. Culture influences every aspect of a person's life. Ritzer says that television is a major factor of influence today. He quotes, "Millions of viewers devote several hours a week to watching contestants try to answer several inane questions that will give them the money they need, without having to work for it or be players in the capitalistic economic system." Critical theorists thought that new technologies would control people, instead of the people having control of them. Technology could eventually control people and "deaden their critical capacities." I think this process has already begun.

Ritzer's theory of McDonaldization also applies to the decline of hobbies. Leisure time has become more efficient for the average person with the creation of video games and the Internet. People can be entertained and not have to do any sort of physical or mental effort. . Technological advances are overrunning people's critical and productive capacities. This is an example of the irrationality of rationality and unanticipated consequences.

Ritzer describes the idea of Herbert Marcuse's one-dimensional society:

"Instead of expressing themselves through the use of technology, people are impoverished by the control exerted over them by technology. Individuality is suppressed as everyone conforms to the demands of technology. Gradually, individual freedom and creativity dwindle away into nothingness."



This is the type of mass man that I am referring to. Technology has the potential to stifle out our individuality and identities. Along the same lines is the notion of the irrationality of rationality. The critical theorists hoped for a society dominated by reason rather than technocratic thinking, where human values were more important than efficiency. Ritzer states,


“In the rational world of capitalism, it is irrational that such a system is destructive of individuals and their needs and abilities; that technology makes them one-dimensional; that the culture industry controls them rather than helping them to express their finest aspirations and abilities; and that despite the existence of more than sufficient wealth, many people remain impoverished, repressed, exploited, and unable to fulfill themselves.”

5. Phantasmagoria

This term refers to effects produced by structures like arcades, the Internet, and newer means of consumption. (Ritzer, 2003) As technology advances, people are becoming more and more useless. We are beginning to live in fake worlds. Buying things off the Internet is like a virtual market. Seeing a person on the computer while you talk to him or her is a fake image of a real human. These are simulated worlds. The burst of reality shows on television is also a sign of phantasmagoria. People are enjoying watching other people live in a staged world. The more we are involved with technology the more we get away from using our own abilities.

Conclusion

As I work on this project during college I see my efforts going into school work and track and field. These constitute my hobbies at this point in my life. I realize that next year I won't have school work or be on the track team so I will need to develop other avenues of productivity in my free time. I never want to stop evaluating the ways I spend my time because I'll never know what tomorrow might bring. I don't want to waste my time and miss out on developing



what I feel are the most important contributions that I can make as a person. These contributions can be to help me enjoy my own life or helping to influence other people's lives. I am not against relaxation or watching some television or even playing video games once and a while- all these things are fun and make life more enjoyable. I am concerned that individuals are missing out on applying themselves through activity in more creative ways.

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